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14. SOUTHERNMOST RECORD OF EASTERN CALANDRA-LARK  
*MELANOCORYPHA BIMACULATA* AND SIGHTING OF LESSER KESTREL  
*FALCO NAUMANNI* FROM MATHERAN, A HILL STATION NEAR MUMBAI

Matheran is situated at c. 73° 18' E and 18° 28' N in the Western Ghats and is about 105 km from Mumbai. This tiny hill station has an area of 7.35 sq. km, out of which 3.87 sq. km is reserved forest while 3.48 sq. km is under buildings, plots, tanks, roads etc. It has a maximum elevation of 803 m and an average rainfall of about 7,500 mm. I was in Matheran during the second week of April 2000. During the two day visit, I had the good fortune of sighting the eastern calandra-lark *Melanocorypha bimaculata*, of which this was the southernmost record and the lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni*, a Red Data species. The following is a brief account of the same.

**Eastern Calandra-lark*****Melanocorypha bimaculata***

On April 8, 2000, while returning from

Charlotte Lake, a man-made reservoir in Matheran, I spotted a solitary, relatively large member of Alaudidae. It moved hurriedly in the dry leaf litter, along the bank of the lake, stopping intermittently to peck at some edible morsel. The two very distinct features that caught my attention were its broad white supercilium and a black patch on the side of the breast. The tail was short, with a stroke of white on its tip. The bird was well camouflaged against the leafy background. It was noticeably stockier and more upright than the greater short-toed lark *Calandrella brachydactyla*. All the field characteristics pointed at only one candidate – the eastern calandra-lark. Later, on April 9, two more birds were sighted near One-Tree-Hill, the southernmost tip of Matheran. They were foraging in a rocky slope interspersed with dry grass beds. They remained in sight for over

15 min before disappearing behind a ledge.

The HANDBOOK states that *M. bimaculata* is a winter visitor to Kashmir, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and an occasional visitor to Kutch. Himmatsinhji (1960) and Tiwari (1993) have also reported the bird from Kutch. According to the HANDBOOK, there is no record of the bird from Maharashtra. However, Grimmett *et al.* (1999) mention its presence up to NW Maharashtra. There is also a confirmed unpublished record of two birds near a waterbody in Nasik dist. (Raha, B. pers. comm. in 1999). The present record is therefore the southernmost one for *M. bimaculata*.

#### Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni*

On the afternoon of April 9, 2000, I saw a bird of prey that had just landed on a barren tree on the rocky slope; 50 m separated the two of us. It was difficult to decipher its identity from that distance, but from the size, it looked like a falcon. On a keener view, it resembled the female of the common kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*.

After preening for a few minutes, the bird began hovering in a typical kestrel-like fashion with short bouts of rapid wing beats interrupted by equally short flights. I needed a closer look to see other characteristics to confirm my initial identification. The bird glided in my direction and was below me, providing a dorsal view. The flight was definitely less laboured than that of the common kestrel. Just when I was weighing up its true identity, the bird got hold of a strong wind current that carried it at least 20 m above me in a fraction of a second. The underbelly was streaked while the wings had darker wing margins.

Meanwhile, the bird spotted something in the grass and swooped down on it. At this juncture it went out of sight while I waited to get another glimpse of it. Within moments it returned with something in its bill and settled on a *Ficus* sp. jutting from the vertical rock face to my right, but at a lower level than me. While the bird dismembered its booty, I crept up to almost 15 m from it. The head was pale and the

conspicuous moustachial stripe of the common kestrel was not visible. The bird was holding on to a grasshopper with its claws. The claws lacked the dark tinge of the common kestrel and by then I was convinced that it was a female of the lesser kestrel *Falco naumanni*.

According to Ali and Ripley (1987), *Falco naumanni* is more patchily distributed than its larger cousin, *F. tinnunculus* and is an irregular passage migrant to East Africa. A few stragglers are known to remain behind and have been sighted between November and April in Ambala, Delhi, Lucknow (U.P.), Dinapur (Bihar), Balasore (Orissa), Kolkata (Bengal), Dibrugarh, Naga hills and N.E. Cachar (Assam), Manipur, to as far south as Chennai (Coonoor-Nilgiris). Within Maharashtra, a flock of several hundred birds has been sighted in Sholapur, apart from a flock of a dozen birds in Ahmednagar in January. Apart from this, there have been unpublished records of the bird from Nasik (Raha, B. pers. comm., 1999). *F. naumanni* is also recorded from Sri Lanka (Hoffmann, 1996).

Though rare, it is widely distributed in India. The inadequate data on the bird could probably be attributed to its resemblance to *F. tinnunculus*. The females of the two species are difficult to differentiate in the field. Only a trained eye can distinguish between the two birds from their hovering styles — instead of the up and down wing strokes of the common, the lesser kestrel beats its wings forward and backward. This is apparently because the body of the lesser kestrel is raised 45° while that of the common is held parallel to the ground. The most important identification is the paler, almost colourless claws of *F. naumanni* compared to the black ones of *F. tinnunculus*. This is the first record of this RED DATA BOOK species from Matheran and therefore worth mentioning.

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15. UNUSUAL FEEDING ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SIBERIAN CRANE  
*GRUS LEUCOGERANUS* AND WILD BOAR *SUS SCROFA*  
IN KEOLADEO NATIONAL PARK, BHARATPUR, RAJASTHAN

Siberian cranes *Grus leucogeranus* are wetland-dependant birds and unlike other cranes that often forage in dry upland areas near wetlands, they usually forage in ankle deep shallows (Sauey 1985). Three Siberian cranes were observed feeding in dried up areas of wetland in the Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, India. The cranes were in areas where the soil appeared ploughed and were observed picking up tufts of grass and putting them aside, and then picking up small items of food. After the cranes had moved away from the foraging sites, we noticed that the area had wet soil and was dug up by boars *Sus scrofa*, as was evident from the hoof marks and droppings of wild boars. All the grass was uprooted; tufts of roots and partly eaten insect larvae were lying all over. A bunch of larvae were wriggling under the tufts of grasses, which were lying all over the dug up areas.

Wild boars are known to feed on roots of grasses and sedges, and also on insects (Prater 1971). They had probably uprooted the grasses to get to these larvae. The cranes took advantage of the ploughing by the wild boars, as they themselves would have found it difficult to uproot the grasses in the dried up area where the soil had hardened after drying. The insect larvae were very small and

individually not of much food value to cranes, but since they were available in abundance, the cranes may have found it profitable to feed on the larvae, which are not on their regular diet. Only the captive bred released birds, which were a part of an experiment to augment the wild population of Siberian cranes, were observed feeding on larvae. It was probably behaviour learnt from sarus cranes, as the Siberian cranes were associated with them more than with the wild Siberian cranes. The captive released birds would often venture out with the sarus cranes to forage in the dry areas. The Siberian cranes are known to feed largely on vegetable matter and occasionally on aquatic insects in their wintering grounds (Ali and Ripley 1983, Vijayan 1991).

Birds are known to benefit from feeding associations with other animals. Egrets *Egretta* spp., drongos *Dicrurus* spp., starlings *Sturnus* spp., mynas *Acridotheres* spp., and many other species follow grazing animals and pick up insects disturbed by the movement of these animals in the grass (Ali and Ripley 1983). However, we have not come across any reports of Siberian cranes, which are largely wetlands birds, getting direct benefit from the action of a terrestrial animal like the wild boar.